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**Faculty of Humanities**

**Thesis of PhD dissertation**

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**The formal and functional features of linguistic aggression in the spontaneous  
and classroom discourse of secondary school students**

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# **1. Motivation, aims, structure, methods, informants and theoretical background of the dissertation**

## **1.1. Motivation of the dissertation**

As pieces of international research show, we can state that phenomena and cases belonging to the subject of violence as well as their effects and consequences concerns mainly children and youngsters (Bagshaw 2004: 180; Figula 2004: 223; Brochu 2002; Rex 2006, Walsh 2006). It is a fact that several forms and tools of violent behaviour, harassment, aggressive speaking are present in the lives of the participants of institutional educations, consequently, we must reckon with its effects and consequences (Buda 2005, 2008; Olweus 1999). Based on an accurate and careful, great sample sociological test, Gábor Hajdu and Géza Sáska claim that verbal aggression is more frequently present in school life than physical aggression (2009: 2) and that is why it has become essential to describe secondary school students' linguistic aggression. The dissertation attempts to supply this defect.

The question is important from two points of view. On the other hand, education is our second largest social subsystem, as it concerns at least three and a half million people in Hungary. It is a branch of compulsory public duties from which, due to compulsory education, one can not escape. Consequently, it is extremely important to guarantee the maximal defence of lives, bodily and mental safety for the participants of education. On the other hand, as linguistic aggression as a learned pattern is acutely presented in the language use of children and young people, they are concerned both as aggressors and victims. Therefore, for the examination of this phenomenon, it is an extremely important point to deal with aggression, since the problem emerges from age peculiarities because underage people have not developed their genuine character, which is an essential condition for fighting against aggression. Moreover, linguistic result may assist the birth of a linguistic pedagogy that can actively take part in finding the necessary abilities to fight against (verbal) aggression, cognitive contents, and educate conscious language users.

## 1.2. Aims of the thesis

Verbal aggression at Hungarian schools has been examined mainly by sociologists and social psychologists. They have collected diagnostic and normative knowledge about the problem, primarily about the social, psychological and genetic background of the phenomenon, and the influence of the instantaneous (linguistic) atmosphere on the reaction to verbal aggression and experience emerging from aggression. The dissertation aims to complete these results with linguistic examination, and, arising from it, to form a starting point for a language pedagogy based on the formal and functional description of secondary school students' verbal aggression as a kind of input information which can be the basis for the pedagogical application of the newest linguistic knowledge.

To achieve this goal, I want to:

1. give an interdisciplinary description of verbal aggression, dispose it within aggression and human behaviour, adverting to the physiological and emotional background of linguistic aggression
2. describe the system and norms of the linguistic aggression
3. with the help of questionnaires and sociolinguistic interviews, map linguistic attitudes connected with verbal aggression
4. explore the samples of verbal aggression as a learned behaviour, name the general reasons for linguistic aggression
5. give a description of secondary school students' formal and informal language use focusing on verbal aggression. Within this:
  - a) characterize spontaneous conversation and classroom communication as well as present them as the special spots of verbal aggression
  - b) describe verbal and non-verbal linguistic aggression in spontaneous conversation and classroom communication with the help of discourse analysis
  - c) classify the types of persiflage emerging in spontaneous conversation, and analyse it in connection with sex
  - d) classify the types of breach of discipline and that of students' verbal aggression, as well as analyse it functionally in student/student and teacher/student interactions.

The dissertation tries to expose linguistic aggression as an activity against norms from the point of view of its actual accomplishment norms, at the same time it attempts to characterize the phenomenon itself as a special communication sub-case when the speaker, using the norms of

accomplishment norms for communication, disclaims communication itself, or any of its components or conditions.

Examining the need for dominance expressed in human communication against the norms with the help of discourse analysis can, *scilicet*, can refer to cognitive and metacognitive contents and psychological progresses—gatherable from the regular individual language use—that can not be examined as such in the intentions of the interaction partners but can be observed directly as a canalizing factor of the latter. These results can indirectly indicate expanded social contexts.

### **1.3. The structure of the thesis**

**Chapter 1, Introduction**, displays the linguistic commitment of the thesis, its special propoundment and direction. Additionally, it is about the social and academic importance of examination, summarizes the aims of research, and displays the chapters of the thesis.

Chapter 2, **Joint demand**, deals with the social psychology, ethology and communication theory background of communication, and is aimed at placing conversation as the most typical human behaviour in the ethogram of *homo sapiens*. Chapter 3, **Theoretical background of language description**, within the frames of linguistic pragmatics, treats the possibilities of segmenting spoken language, the concept of face, additionally it mentions the best known models of politeness and impoliteness. Chapter 4, **Aggression in interdisciplinary frames**, presents linguistic aggression in connection with aggression as a part of human behaviour, reacting to the results of different academic branches. In this chapter, one can find the definition of linguistic aggression, the description of how it works on the base of the aggressor's and the victim's roles, as well as a short presentation of the results from different areas of linguistics dealing with verbal aggression. Chapter 5, **Material and method**, presents the informants, shows the corpora created for research, and the methods for elaborating. Chapter 6, **Empirical exploration of formal and functional characteristics of linguistic aggression**, contains the statistics and discourse analysis of questionnaires, sociolinguistic interviews, spontaneous and classroom conversations. Chapter 7, **Summary**, briefly responds to the hypotheses of the dissertation, the possibilities of applying the results, additionally it enumerates some possible further analyses and expanding corpora. The dissertation end up with Bibliography and Annexes.

### **1.4. Informants participating in research, corpora collected, and applied methods**

Research is organized on base of the cumulative principle known from sociolinguistics. It means that I use materials collected with several methods for the functional and taxonomical description of the same linguistic phenomenon and exploring the individual and social reasons behind language use. I also use different methods for elaborating data, while, owing to the difficulty of grabbing the phenomenon, I evaluate results in connection with the methods.

Informants participating in the thesis are interpreted as bound to the *school level* they attend and that is why I have called them secondary school students in the title of the dissertation. When selecting pattern, the starting point was entering and leaving educational system not biological or psychological age (which, of course, are not adjunctive factors for our research). In examining linguistic accomplishment, besides the categories of *age* and *sex*, *school type* is also a special feature because, depending on school type, the quantity and quality of curricula varies as well as students' sociocultural background, which is one of the important components of language usage habits.

In our research, there were 261 secondary school informants, 122 boys and 139 girls; 48 of them 15-year old, 62 of them 16-year old, also 62 of them 17-year old, and 89 of them 18-year old. The number of 18-year old informants is higher because there students who started vocational training after taking GCSE, consequently, in the pattern there are 18-year old students attending 9<sup>th</sup> class. Classifying informants according to school types happened with the help of five categories — as I differentiate between grammar-school students and crack grammar-school students — and this classification does not coincide with the official distribution in public education<sup>1</sup>, as a whole, in our research there were participants from crack grammar-schools, grammar-schools, AJPk<sup>2</sup> schools, technical schools and vocational schools.

I collected data concerning the most informants with the help of questionnaires; the number of participants was 261. 26 questions were divided into 153 variables and measuring was done with these variables. The questionnaire focused on the sociocultural background of the participants (questions 1–6), linguistic attitude towards linguistic aggression, knowledge about language use, language use strategies, sample conveying, and the personal reasons behind linguistic aggression. Additionally, I measured prejudice connected with linguistic aggression, its ideology, and stigmatization habits. The questionnaire also furnished data about how secondary school students themselves observe verbal aggression and whether they consider it as a problem in the language use of their own and that of others.

Another important method of our research is sociolinguistic interview which is meant as direct data collecting for taxonomical description, and is a more personal means of exploring

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<sup>1</sup> Details: [http://eduline.hu/kozoktatas/2011/12/2/kozepiskolak\\_2011es\\_rangsora\\_KEIWDV](http://eduline.hu/kozoktatas/2011/12/2/kozepiskolak_2011es_rangsora_KEIWDV)  
<http://www.ajkp.hu/digitalcity/news/latestNews.jsp?dom>

<sup>2</sup> Details: <http://www.ajkp.hu/digitalcity/news/latestNews.jsp?dom>

language use habits, linguistic attitude connected with verbal aggression. At the same time, it is a kind of control to questionnaires because here on “can not” refuse answering, or refusing the answer is also a message. “The directed conversation in a sociolinguistic interview is not a prototypically spontaneous conversation but is a type of discourse and, in spite of its genre characteristics, it is adaptable for examining collective meanings and style” (cf. Bartha–Hámori 2010: 305 after Labov 1984). With the help of discourse analysis, I have examined what kinds of strategies, what kinds of facial work in formal circumstances make it possible to talk about verbal aggression either on metalinguistic, metapragmatical or megcognitive level for secondary school students.

Sociolinguistic interviews were made with 29 persons, of whom 5 were 9<sup>th</sup> class grammar-school students, 2 girls and 3 boys, 7 were 11<sup>th</sup> class grammar-school students, 3 girls and 4 boys, 5 were 9<sup>th</sup> class AJKP-students, 3 girls and 2 boys, 3 were 9<sup>th</sup> class vocational school students, 1 girl and 2 boys, 4 were 11<sup>th</sup> class vocational school students, 2 girls and 2 boys, and 4 were 11<sup>th</sup> class technical school students, all of them boys.

The third considerable corpus of research is built up from Facebook posts recording spontaneous conversations, copied and distributed by informants especially and exclusively for our research. The fourth and most important corpus is the approximately 50-lesson video-recordings of classroom discourse taken during school lessons. 46 lessons were linearized with transcriptions. An average lesson takes 45 minutes, in three cases 90 minutes. I have taken recordings in several lessons and professional and special courses (which are considered as half-formal environment) of grammar school, AJKP school, vocational school and technical school.

All four types of corpora were analysed with two methods, data gathered from questionnaires were elaborated with the help of SPSS 20 program based on mathematical statistics, while evaluating other data was done with the help of discourse analysis. Through the method discourse analysis and its more philosophical perspective, I focused on exploring linguistic attitude emerging from pronouncements and, at the same time, through microanalysis of texts created in interactions, I attempted to describe the norms of linguistic aggression. For this express purpose, I considered linguistic corpus as an interactive and co-ordinated activity, the structure of which is built up from rules, sets of rules and conventions (Iványi 2010: 76; Schenkein 1978: 2–3 after Kallmeyer–Schütze 1976: 13; Streeck 1983: 96), and behind the practical accomplishment of which there are complex social, sociocultural and individual (emotional, cognitive and physiological) factors. Conversation was considered as a linear process expanding in co-ordinated time, which does not originate as a ready-made complexity but emerges step by step in the speakers’ interactions as a result of a complex, matrix-like approach and reaction.

### **1.5. Theoretical background of the thesis**

Verbal aggression has been expounded in the frames of human communication emerging from the needs of social needs and comprehended as part of the process in which the speaker gives his/her self-image, and the manifestation of which is influenced by the speaker's emotional, physiological homeostasis or its absence. Consequently, I have stated that verbal aggression as an attack against one's self-image that its realization cancels the aim on which the whole human psyche is organised, i.e. the process of balanced connection between two human beings.

In an interaction, verbal displaying of a person's self-image is a part of personal disposition, raising order between members, constructing social meaning. On the other hand, it is a base for experiencing social life which can not exist without hierarchy and order (Gerlai 1986: 135). This hierarchy emerges as the result of agreement between the participants, and its process can be characterized by cooperation or conflict. That is, depending on the inner stableness and intention of interlocutors, the acts of interaction can explicitly or implicitly focus on appreciating and collateral defence of each other's verbally expressed façade, or on gaining a firm hold over the partner. That is why I have attempted to explore the phenomenon with using different branches of linguistics, because none of them is able to display secondary school age people's verbal aggression cases completely.

Sociolinguistic research has no access to all kinds of verbal aggression, it can not explore all manifestations of aggressive intention. This can be done with the help of functional approaches of pragmatics and communication theory. As the question of verbal aggression belongs to the macro-pragmatic area of politeness research, the main theoretical background of my research were determined on the base of speech act theory, cooperation and politeness principles, impoliteness model (Culpeper 2011: 220–253), and conversational implicitness, regarding also the category of face/façade, as verbal aggression, like all linguistic tools, does not focus on the withdrawal of the partner in the interaction but against the verbally exposed face/façade, (self-)image. Consequently, it was an important point of analysis to describe the interactive development of face/façade both on the side of perception and production.

On the other hand, even pragmatics in itself is not able to describe verbal aggression because, for a pragmatist, an intention does not mean to understand an individual but to understand a convention that hides its own intentions. Conventions are mainly directed by rules, meanwhile sociolinguistics, through discourse (micro)analysis, can apprehend human beings behind the rules, living in exceedingly complicated restrictions. Practically, it examines the social impact on

individual language use, how it influences the development of the personal ego, personality, identity through linguistic attitude, and how it is articulated in interactions changing with situations, topics and partners. To explore these phenomena, I have applied the constructivist concept of style used in sociolinguistics. In the microanalyses, I have used knowledge of descriptive linguistic in concerning different “levels” of language.

Last, through the toolbar of communication theory, I attempted to divide the functional types of verbal aggression completed affectively or without affect—as one of these focuses on the withdrawal of the conversation partner while the other one tends to create connection (cf. persiflage). In addition, with the help of the “linguistic cheating” model containing communicational point of view, I have emphasized the fact that the aggressor uses communication as an interactive frame in completing verbal aggression and, pragmatically, this linguistic act is aimed to withdraw his/her partner while, from the point of view of communication, it declares the existence of the partner as the message connotes the recipient as an agent.

## **2. Theses of the dissertation**

1. As a learned form of behaviour, verbal aggression is an infraction of norms which shows various forms in communication, and its functional aim is to position dominance account of the participants at the expense of the other and, in the function of group dynamics, it can express group identity.
2. From the point of view of focusing on its victim, verbal aggression in the language use of secondary school age children can be indirect, direct or hidden. Depending on what displays aggressive intention in the interaction, indirect verbal aggression can be a content aggression, formal aggression, or aggression from the point of view of speech right.
3. Research has explored lack of knowledge concerning cognitive contents of verbal aggression, on the one hand, and the fact that the pieces of knowledge obtained are mainly psychological, they are not integrate, not reflected, they have a strategic character, they are under-differentiated, and stigmatized. Also the high-grade prejudice experienced with personal usage of verbal aggression can be explained with this phenomenon.
4. The informants take their opinions about verbal aggression from the everyday experiences, mainly from the direction of the perpetrator, and consider it as wielding power—in spite of the fact that verbal aggression is not a mark of stability and self-control but that of instability. Thus it means that, on the level of conceptual thinking, the importance of verbal aggression and its social consequences are judged from the direction of semblance.



5. The discourse analysis of the data gained from the interviews, in connection with the statistical analysis of the questionnaires, draws attention to an important difference between the secondary school age children's normative and strategic knowledge about verbal aggression. While the informants explain verbal aggression from the direction of the perpetrator, on the one hand, and, both in the interview and the questionnaires, they consider verbal aggression a usual, up-to-date phenomenon which is a characteristic feature of everyday informal and formal discourses, they speak of acceptance and habituation; on the level of discourse strategies, when speaking of the concrete phenomena of verbal aggression and expounding their own language use—because of the inconvenient topic—a continuous face-work gives them a kind of façade defence of each level of discourse formatting, on the other. This means that, on the level of pragmatics, the informants do not consider verbal aggression a usual, up-to-date phenomenon but, in contradiction to the content of their manifestation, their language use follows sharp rules, not depending on the speaker's gender, age and education.
6. Judging verbal aggression also shows big uncertainty from the point of view of self-knowledge and it can be derived from the lack of knowledge needed for identification of verbal aggression, and from the deficiency of conscious language usage.
7. Self-knowledge concerning verbal aggression can be formed both from the rationalization of other persons' reactions and listening to themselves and, in connection with it, hearing verbal aggression as an own speech act does not extinguish the existing experiences but, through habituation and depreciation of aggressive energy, it can support this experience. Impeaching and stigmatizing the aggressive manifestation of the informants can result the same as the speaker gets used to impeachment, consequently, its the emotional effect and restraining power disappears but, on the other hand, the outcome builds into self-knowledge and becomes the bearer of the “negative prestige”.
8. In spite of the fact that verbal aggression is a ore frequent phenomenon between friends than in family interactions, the informants consider their own parents as the primary samples for verbal aggression. On the other hand, family interaction is more prestigious. It follows from this fact that the secondary school age children count for verbal aggression present in their own language use as a speech strategy the process of which emerged earlier, influenced by the parents' mediation and affirmed in the coeval communities and obtained a special communicative function.
9. Personal involvement against verbal aggression moves functionally moves together with the proportion of desensitivity as the measure of desensitivity against verbal aggression itself does not only depend on experiencing verbal aggression but also on personal involvement. Data show

that experiencing verbal aggression in the family does not lead to desensitization while that in cultural codes (movies, music) does.

10. In the languages use of secondary school age children, both in spontaneous and classroom versions, all kinds of verbal aggression is present, except for constructive aggression—as constructive aggression is mainly related to personal hindrance, its completion serves one's own interest not that of the other person (it emerges from its role in classroom discourse), such as one of the subcategories of indirect verbal aggression, i.e. cursing which has not appeared in the discourses examined. This last phenomenon may come from the loss of importance of religious life, not from the committed respect for religious taboos. For the informants, cursing does not mean infraction of taboos because it has lost its functions, there is no situation which would be relevant to reducing tension through cursing.

11. The normative metalinguistic knowledge concerning verbal aggression, on the level of linguistic attitude, has its impact on the formal and functional features of verbal aggression emerging in practice. If, on the level of attitude, a linguistically aggressive form is not important or is considered as a mild aggression and is free from stigmatization, it appears as a communicative strategy when needed while, on the other hand, the stigmatized form of language use may appear in certain cases in attitude. There are exclusively two circumstances that can break the barrier prohibiting the appearance of norm infracting act in language usage. The first of them is a high-grade intimacy between the partners which changes the norms. The other one is the arousal growth which means a kind of disharmonic, choleric state in which, because of the deficiency in rational thinking, the speaker gains back his/her homeostasis through operating automatically norm infracting samples, linguistically aggressive act.

12. Indirect verbal aggression can be aimed at conflict solving and persiflage as well. As for persiflage, boys tend to exceed one another in rudeness expressing their inadequacies, while girls prefer the source of humour in it, thus, this manner of speech makes common laughter possible for them rather than a ritual defeat over the other person. In the case of persiflage, the linguistic manifestation seems to follow the actual verbal aggression when examining the use of cursing, and, sometimes the former even exceeds the latter. However, there is an essential difference between the two. While in the case of an actual affront we have some story, i.e. a problem embedded in a story appears on the level of narration, though its level of its extension may vary, in the case of persiflage, there is a much looser connection between the series within sequences, and there is no other topic of the conversation as a wanton railing and the discourses lack the linear development of the story.

13. The forms of verbal aggression used in spontaneous and classroom discourses show significant differences only in those cases when it appears in the communication of partners in

asymmetric relations not in that of partners in mutual dependence. This phenomenon can be explained by the language norms connected to different state relations, i.e. by the fact that in the cases of asymmetric relations, even milder aggressive forms can be considered as severe infractions and they are able to destroy the face of the partner. In the relation of mutual dependence, on the other hand, even within formal frames, the discourse develops along the norms of informal media and spontaneous speech when it attempts to manifest aggressive aims.

14. When comparing indirect, direct, and hidden verbal aggression used in classroom discourses, we have come to the conclusion that, if the informant directly attacks the status of the teacher, he/she avoids using taboo or cursing words transmitting the attitude that he/she undergoes the teacher's status even when attacking against it on the level of interaction. But when he/she applies indirect or hidden forms, they use curse words because in these cases it is the aggressive aim itself that is hidden or made implicit adjusted to the asymmetric, formal situation, and thus they can gratify their passions even on the level of words. This statement is in accordance with the data gained from questionnaires and interviews.

15. In classroom discourses, the place of affront against the teacher completed through open dysphemistic language usage is usually taken over by enouncements not adequate to the status. These enouncements often appear as formal aggression, i.e. through face-work, the student does not only represent his/her status verbally but also with non-verbal signs. Impeachment can focus on curriculum, school work and their pointlessness and uselessness, devaluating and avoiding the teacher's opinion and disciplinary actions. In these cases, as aggression does not directly focus on the teacher but on the factors creating the status, impeachment can often happen with curse, as we can see in the data.

16. According to school types, we can observe significant differences in connection with status and applied verbal aggression. In the case of secondary grammar school students, the proportion of those who do not consider verbal aggression against friends as real aggression is the highest. On the other hand, the student of vocational schools evaluate the status of their coevals the most, the status of the teacher is the lowest in this group, and they are the ones who think it is all right to use rude language with parents. Nevertheless, the non-complete family as a sociocultural background is the most characteristic namely in this group. To sum up, in the case of vocational school students, following the language usage norms according to different status can only rarely be observed, scissors are less open in their case, and it is a sign for the lack of conscious language usage.

17. There are differences in the verbal aggression samples classroom discourses. While in secondary grammar schools the direct verbal aggression between each another expands to one or two turns, in vocational schools and technical schools the norms of classroom communication

are determined by the norms of spontaneous conversation, which can be connected to the semi-formal character of practice lessons. In accordance with this, the direct aggression between the students often expands to 15-20-turn persiflage. In secondary grammar school discourses, we can mainly observe different kinds of hidden verbal aggression.

18. In spontaneous conversations, when it has a choleric character, the use of words is balanced between boys and girls but without passion boys are definitely ruder. In the language use of girls and boys the significant difference is not in infraction of taboo—as girls, like boys, use dysphemistic expressions in choleric situations, they even use the lexicon characteristic to the male register and, as aggressors, they identify themselves with the male sexual roles—but in the way how they express their aims of infraction of norms. Girls attempt to avoid open confrontation as aggressors but they often apply the strategy of refusal and malediction.

19. In secondary grammar school classroom discourses, there are differences between the discourses of boys and girls. While boys attack directly, girls prefer hidden and indirect forms and apply verbal aggression only formally as not only is the criticised third person present at the time of discourse but he/she often joins in conversation.

20. The informants have used indirect verbal aggression against people both of the same status or over themselves. It is interesting that gender stereotypes can well be observed—if aggression focuses on a boy, it refers to effeminacy on the one hand, and, in the case of girls, it articulates her deviant sexual behaviour.

21. Indirect verbal aggression is characteristic to classroom discourses because squealing and complaint appear in this strategy. Indirect verbal aggression is often a means of rightful self-defence, however, it often focuses on the humorous denunciation of the third party (the class-mate). Consequently, it is problematic to handle indirect verbal aggression of classroom discourses as indirect aggression because the third person, against whom impeachment is applied by the aggressor, is present in the classroom and often the victim himself/herself reacts to the direct affront. In these cases, the use of indirect aggression has exclusively formal character, it is a part of aggressor's face-work, and its implicated meaning is a kind of indirect aggression.

22. The infraction of speech right is considered as the mildest one among formal manifestations of verbal aggression, the student under-evaluate its importance, as we can see in the interviews and the questionnaires. Consequently, they tend to move the status difference between teacher and students to the informal as, in that kind of relation, it is a subjective right to join the conversation.

A special and most frequent case of infraction of speech right is the overlapping conversation in classroom discourses. They tend to decline attention, refuse participating in work, and create so called informal micro-communities in the formal media. This can be completed together with

ignoring the norms of the formal media. Overlapping speech as infraction of norm and as aggression is significant because this is the point where students mock the legitimacy of asymmetric relation, and because overlapping speech itself can make learning process during the lesson impossible.

23. It is an attribute of verbal aggression used in classroom discourses that it is always a part of forming social denotation and face-work, and it acts in two directions simultaneously. It indicates identity to the group and, owing to the formal, asymmetric relation—even though aggression does not focus directly on the teacher—indirectly it has an impact on the teacher's status as well.

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